

Because I could not stop for Death; I heard a Fly buzz—when I died

by Emily Dickinson

BEFORE YOU READ

LITERARY FOCUS: IRONY

Stories or poems can surprise you. You may expect something to happen based on what you have read so far, and instead the opposite happens. This literary “surprise” is an example of irony. **Irony** is a contrast between expectations and reality. There are three main kinds of irony:

- **Situational irony** is the kind described above—a contrast between what happens and what we expect to happen.
- **Verbal irony** is a contrast between what is said and what is meant.
- **Dramatic irony** occurs when the reader knows something a character does not know.

The following poems by Emily Dickinson rely on situational and verbal irony.

READING SKILLS: SUMMARIZING A TEXT

Have you ever read the capsule reviews of movies in the TV listings? They usually summarize a movie’s plot in just a few sentences. A **summary** of a text is a brief retelling of its main events and most important ideas. The best summaries are complete but short. They include important information only. Summarizing a text is a useful reading skill because it can help you gain a better understanding of what you read.

Use the Skill Both of these poems by Emily Dickinson tell a very brief story. To follow the events, stop at the end of each stanza and summarize what just happened.

REVIEW SKILLS

As you read “Because I could not stop for Death” and “I heard a Fly buzz—when I died,” look for the use of **symbols**.

SYMBOL

A person, place, thing, or event that has meaning in itself and stands for something beyond itself as well. The dove, for example, is a symbol of peace.



Reading Standard 3.3

Analyze the ways in which irony, tone, mood, the author’s style, and the “sound” of language achieves specific rhetorical or aesthetic purposes.

Reading Standard 3.7 (Grade 9–10 Review)

Recognize and understand the significance of various literary devices, including figurative language, imagery, allegory, and symbolism, and explain their appeal.

Because I could not stop for Death

Emily Dickinson

IDENTIFY

Underline the word in line 2 that describes death in an **ironic** way.

INTERPRET

What is happening in lines 5–8?

INTERPRET

In lines 9–12, what do the playing children, the fields of grain, and the sunset **symbolize**, or stand for, other than themselves? (*Grade 9–10 Review*)

Because I could not stop for Death—
He kindly stopped for me—
The Carriage held but just Ourselves—
And Immortality.

5 We slowly drove—He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility—

We passed the School, where Children strove
10 At Recess—in the Ring—
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—
We passed the Setting Sun—

Or rather—He passed Us—
The Dews drew quivering and chill—
15 For only Gossamer,¹ my Gown—
My Tippet—only Tulle²—

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1. **gossamer** *n.*: thin, soft material.
2. **tippet** . . . **tulle**: shawl made of fine netting.

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground—
The Roof was scarcely visible—
20 The Cornice³—in the Ground—

Since then—'tis Centuries—and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity—

3. **cornice** *n.*: molding at the top of a building.



New England Cemetery—Augusta, Maine (1997) by Fred Danziger (20" × 23").
Collection of the artist.

INTERPRET

What do you think the
"House" is in line 17?

SUMMARIZE

When does this poem end?
Where is the speaker now?

I heard a Fly buzz— when I died

Emily Dickinson

I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air—
Between the Heaves of Storm—

5 The Eyes around—had wrung them dry—
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset—when the King
Be witnessed—in the Room—

I willed my Keepsakes—Signed away
10 What portion of me be
Assignable—and then it was
There interposed a Fly—

With Blue—uncertain stumbling Buzz—
Between the light—and me—
15 And then the Windows failed—and then
I could not see to see—

CLARIFY

What happens as the speaker dies (lines 1–4)?

ANALYZE

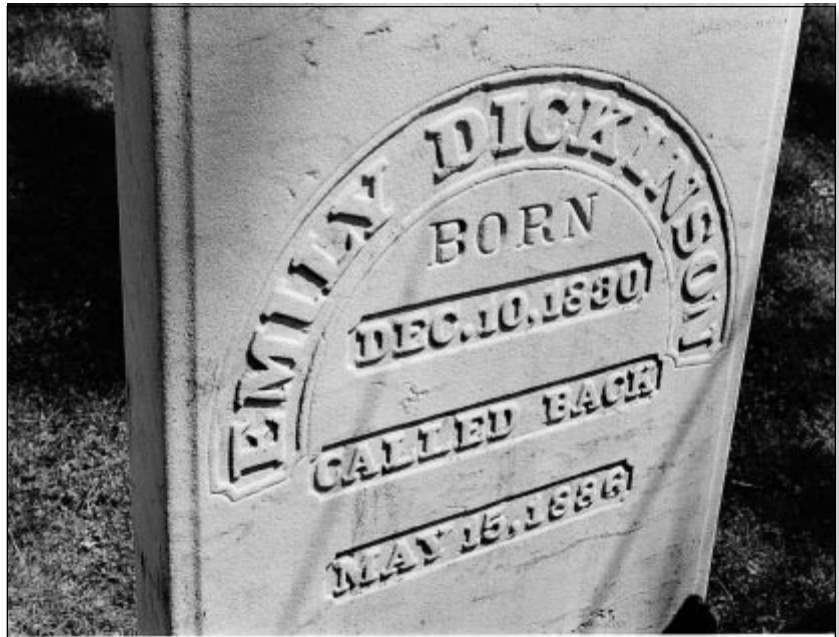
Whom do the speaker and the others in the room expect to see (lines 5–12)? Whom or what do they see instead? In what way is the situation **ironic**?

INTERPRET

What does the speaker mean when she says the “Windows failed” in line 15?

FLUENCY

Read the poem aloud twice. On your second reading, decide how you will treat the dashes.



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Because I could not stop for Death; I heard a Fly buzz—when I died

Reading Skills: Summarizing a Text In the chart below, write brief **summaries** of the two poems. Include only the important events or ideas. Summarize stanza by stanza.

Summary of "Because I could not stop for Death":

Summary of "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died":



Check your Standards Mastery at the back of this book.

Irony

Irony is a discrepancy between appearances and reality. There are three main types of irony: verbal irony, situational irony, and dramatic irony.

DIRECTIONS: Complete the chart with examples from the selection that illustrate each of the three types of irony. (Not all selections will include all three types of irony.)

Type of Irony	Example from Selection
<p>Verbal Irony: a contrast between what is said and what is meant—for example, calling a bald man “Curly.”</p>	
<p>Situational Irony: a contrast between what you expect to happen and what actually happens—for example, when the birthday girl cries at her party.</p>	
<p>Dramatic Irony: a contrast between what the characters know and what the reader or audience knows—for example, when the reader knows a character will die at the end of the story but the character does not know.</p>	